



Michigan Association of Conservation Districts

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RE: Senate Natural Resources, and the Great Lakes Committee Testimony

Thank you Mr. Chair, members of the committee for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Lori Phalen and I am the Executive Director for the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts. We represent the interests of Michigan's 79 Conservation Districts, the over 350 publicly elected board members and the hundreds of staff members and volunteers that work in our conservation district offices. Michigan Conservation Districts are local units of government that provide natural resource management services to Michigan's non-industrial private land owners, who collectively own 60% of Michigan's land base.

Michigan Conservation Districts are known as the delivery system for the state's non-industrial private lands programs. Today, Districts proudly deliver several programs including the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program, the Conservation Technical Assistance Initiative, the Bovine TB Wildlife Risk Mitigation Project, Critical Dunes Vegetative Removal Assurances, Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control programs, the Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative and the Hunter Access Program. Districts also hold several Great Lakes Restoration Initiative grants, DEQ 319 watershed planning and implementation grants and at the close of FY2011, Districts successfully completed a three-county pilot program for Wetlands Assistance with the DEQ. Additionally, in partnership with the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, Michigan Conservation Districts delivered \$35.9 million in cost share to address existing resource concerns on private lands in FY2011.

I have taken a moment to provide this list of programs and initiatives to highlight the fact Districts get it done! And, that federal and state agencies, state legislators, local units of government and partner organizations believe in and support the role and purpose of Michigan Conservation Districts as the delivery system for natural resource conservation programs to our private landowners.

Today, I am pleased to be here to voice our support of the forestry bill package. Non industrial private landowners hold 57% of Michigan's 19.3 million acres of forested lands. Presently, 80% or more of our non-industrial private forest landowners are not managing their land and most non-industrial private timber sales that do take place, happen without professional or technical assistance. We have a significant opportunity to change these dire statistics, to a system where we actively encourage private landowners better manage their forestlands and capitalize on the economic and environmental benefits available.

The current substitutes for Senate Bill 1057, 1059 and 1061 are of particular interest. Senate Bill 1057 sets up the framework through which conservation districts will serve as the local delivery system providing forestry information, education and assistance with the goal of engaging landowners in active management of their forested lands. Through this work conservation districts will build a positive working relationship between private landowners and the state, support and bolster the private sector, and enhance rural development. Again, I would like to stress that this framework will support and bolster land-based private sector service providers, not compete against them. This will be accomplished by moving landowners to private sector service providers for their forest management needs, including forest management plans, timber sales, and natural resource and wildlife habitat improvement projects. This bill sets up clear parameters to accomplish these goals, with oversight provided by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

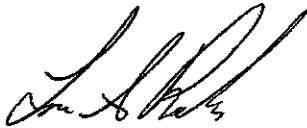
Senate Bill 1059 addresses the Qualified Forest Program, moving the program to the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and incorporated conservation districts to provide a local entry point for landowners. MDARD has a strong philosophy of working cooperatively with private landowners, and in delivering services efficiently and effectively. They have an outstanding record with the PA116 program and with their experience and knowledgeable staff would be able to ramp up and efficiently manage the revised QFP program.

We also support Senate Bill 1061, which creates joint responsibility for Michigan's forest management and forest products industry to both the DNR and MDARD. This joint responsibility will allow each department to bring their expertise to table to better manage our forest resources and revitalize the state's effort to promote and grow Michigan's forest products industry. We look forward to a positive and proactive working relationship between these two agencies for the ultimate benefit of the 60% of our land base held by over 355,000 non-industrial private landowners

In closing, I would like to commend you for addressing the importance of Michigan's forest resource through these bills. Michigan is blessed with an amazingly diverse natural resource base. Michigan's forests, if managed correctly, can be an ecological and economic powerhouse, providing economic sustainability for our rural communities while improving wildlife habitat and ecological sustainability for our children's children. MACD will continue to work with all of you as these bills move forward and I look forward to coming back to this committee in the future to share with you the positive impacts these bills have had from the local perspective of Michigan's Conservation Districts.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to you today and I would be happy to answer any of your questions.

Sincerely,



Lori Phalen
Executive Director